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Help Our Veterans Vote

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Hartford

WHAT is the secretary of Veterans Affairs thinking? On May 5, the department led by James B. Peake issued a directive that bans nonpartisan voter registration drives at federally financed nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and shelters for homeless veterans. As a result, too many of our most patriotic American citizens — our injured and ill military veterans — may not be able to vote this November.

I have witnessed the enforcement of this policy. On June 30, I visited the Veterans Affairs Hospital in West Haven, Conn., to distribute information on the state's new voting machines and to register veterans to vote. I was not allowed inside the hospital.

Outside on the sidewalk, I met Martin O'Neal, a 92-year-old man who lost a leg while fighting the Nazis in the mountains of Northern Italy during the harsh winter of 1944. Mr. O'Neal has been a resident of the hospital since 2007. He wanted to vote last year, but he told me that there was no information about how to register to vote at the hospital and the nurses could not answer his questions about how or where to cast a ballot.

I carry around hundreds of blank voter registration cards in the trunk of my car for just such occasions, so I was able to register Mr. O'Neal in November. I also registered a few more veterans — whoever I could find outside on the hospital's sidewalk.

There are thousands of veterans of wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf and the current campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan who are isolated behind the walls of V.A. hospitals and nursing homes across the country. We have an obligation to make sure that every veteran has the opportunity to make his or her voice heard at the ballot box.

Connecticut's attorney general, Richard Blumenthal, and I wrote to Secretary Peake in July to request that elections officials be let inside the department's facilities to conduct voter education and registration. Our request was denied.

The department offers two reasons to justify its decision. First, it claims that voter registration drives are disruptive to the care of its patients. This is nonsense. Veterans can fill out a voter registration card in about 90 seconds.

Second, the department claims that its employees cannot help patients register to vote because the Hatch Act forbids federal workers from engaging in partisan political activities. But this interpretation of the Hatch Act is erroneous. Registering people to vote is not partisan activity.

If the department does not want to burden its staff, there are several national organizations with a long history of nonpartisan advocacy for veterans and their right to vote that are eager to help, as are elected officials like me.

The department has placed an illegitimate obstacle in the way of election officials across the country and, more important, in the way of veterans who want to vote. A group of 21 secretaries of state — Republicans and Democrats throughout the country, led by me and my counterpart in Washington State, Sam Reed — has asked Secretary Peake to lift his department's ridiculous ban on voter registration drives.

Bills that would require the department to repeal the ban have been filed in both houses of Congress. They need to be signed into law no later than Oct. 1, so that veterans in V.A. care don't miss their states' deadlines to register to vote in the fall elections.

But federal legislation shouldn't be needed for the Department of Veterans Affairs to lift the ban on voter registration drives by state and local election officials and nonpartisan groups.

The federal government should be doing everything it can to support our nation's veterans who have served us so courageously. There can be no justification for any barrier that impedes the ability of veterans to participate in democracy's most fundamental act, the vote.

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